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ABSTRACT

The Attendance +Plus program was initiated by the Fabens Independent School District to address the problem of high student dropout rates in west Texas schools. Aspects of the successful plan include cultivation of caring attitudes; emphasis on individual importance; rejection of myths about minority students and dropouts; and encouragement of academic success through effective teaching. The program's success is based on the assumption that a direct correlation exists between increased attendance and dropout reduction. Strategies utilized at the Board of Trustees, central administration, and school levels are listed. (13 references) (LMI)

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ATTENDANCE +PLUS
A Dropout Prevention Program

by Eli Casey

[Eli Casey, a doctoral student at New Mexico State University and 30 year veteran educator, has served as both teacher and principal at the elementary and secondary levels. He is currently superintendent of the Fabens Independent School District located in an area of extreme poverty along the Rio Grande River in Far West Texas. The district's student population of 2200+ is 96 percent Hispanic. On May 26, 1989, the 71st Legislature of the State of Texas unanimously adopted House Resolution #843 commending the Fabens ISD for establishing itself as a model school for attendance and dropout prevention.]

For some time now, education in America has been besieged with the problem of students dropping out of school. Most recently, in January, 1990, the United States Secretary of Education, Dr. Lauro Cavazos, reported to the nation that achievement by students in our schools is inadequate. He said, "As a nation we should be appalled, appalled that we have placed our children in such jeopardy." [1] The Cavazos report also stated that, in general, children in 1988 scored as poorly or worse in both reading and writing as their predecessors in 1984.

Edmund Janko, a classroom teacher from Bayside, New York, recently summed up the situation as follows:

> "There is no denying the sad state of learning in our country, but the accusers have hauled the wrong defendant into the dock. Schools and teachers cannot in all honesty be blamed for the shortcomings of their students, because there is ample evidence that American children haven't really tried our educational system. There's no telling if they would like it or not -- and there's certainly no way the mass of them could possibly be good at it because they routinely run up huge totals of absences."[2]

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[1] Lauro Cavazos, U.S. Commissioner of Education, Washington, D.C., "Student Skills on the Skids", El Paso Times, January 10, 1990, p. 1A.

[2] Edmund Janko, "Students Who Won't Take a Taste of Education", The Education Digest, January, 1988, p. 26.

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During the spring of 1986, in an effort to address the problem of absences, characteristic of most dropouts, the Fabens Independent School District (FISD) initiated Attendance +Plus, the district's current dropout prevention program. The results have been especially gratifying. In contrast to Texas' reported dropout rate of 87,803, or 6.4 percent of public school students in grades 7-12 for the 1987-88 school year, the FISD annual dropout rate has averaged below 5 percent since the 1986-87 school year.

Although the Fabens dropout rate is exemplary, we certainly do not profess to have all the answers to this problem. One thing we do know however, is that the typical bureaucratic solution of additional staff and money is not the answer. While this approach may contribute to the solution, its role will be minor due to the very personal nature of the problem. Careful analysis and candid discussions of the facts, an acceptance of a commitment to put forth whatever effort is necessary to adequately attack the problem must be part of any corrective plan. The improvement of our district's dropout rate is the result of hard work and a great expenditure of time and physical energy by adults truly committed to the well being of students. Those who are searching for a solution solely within an expanded budget and a written plan will never find it. The solution to this problem goes beyond the written word and into the realm of feelings.

CARING ATTITUDE

Within the Fabens ISD, there is a common belief that the key word and action in addressing the dropout problem is "CARING". We believe the first, and by far, the most important step to be taken by school personnel to reduce the dropout rate is to exhibit a more caring attitude toward all students. Caring adults, and especially caring teachers, are critical elements to be considered by any district seriously interested in reducing their dropout rate. We must somehow create a culture of greater concern for all students, and especially those who are at risk, if we truly expect them to enjoy attending school. "Virtually all effective dropout prevention programs involve matching at-risk students with caring adults, and good programs extend the time the students spend with these adults."[3] Without this philosophical commitment from adults, beginning with the school board, a district can't win the attendance battles, and without winning the battles, it cannot hope to win the dropout war.

On April 24, 1989, the El Paso Times newspaper published a story on the Fabens ISD attendance and dropout successes entitled "Fabens Teens Just Don't Quit". In the process of gathering information,

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[3] D.S. Yarborough, ADVANCE: A Rescue Program for Potential Dropouts, Il Principal, S 89, v 69, p. 46.

the educational reporter held separate interviews with students, board members, and staff in an attempt to find out why the local students had consistently chosen to remain in school. The following spontaneous comments printed in the article are indicative of the feelings which have been successfully cultured by the district.

Staff:

"Our kids really believe we care about them."

Students:

"Around here, teachers help in any way they can.

Students feel that somebody cares that they do their homework."

"Teachers give me that extra push."

Board members:

"Our teachers and administrators take a personal interest in our kids. As a result, parents take more interest in getting their kids a good education."

"If one kid drops out, that's one too many. The entire community tries to provide the appropriate opportunity and motivation for our children."[4]

These statements reflect the feelings of the entire district and give an insightful person a definite clue as to why the district's dropout rate is exemplary.

IMPORTANCE TO SELF AND TO THE GROUP

To increase daily school attendance among students, we must convey to them that they are needed. Teachers and principals should constantly reinforce the idea that attendance is important, not only to the individual, but also to their classmates, campus, and district. High attendance is the end product of a team effort made possible through the efforts of each very important individual involved. Many truancies and other unnecessary absences can be avoided if the proper degree of importance is given to them early in the educational careers of children. Dropout profiles most often include two major components: poor attendance records and the lack of a sense of belonging. Thus, it is imperative to let our students know that their presence and personal achievements are important. Praise and positive media coverage are two very

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[4] Ramon Renteria, "Fabens Teens Just Don't Quit", El Paso Times, April 24, 1989, p. 1A.

effective ways this can be done.

During the first faculty meeting ever attended by this writer, the principal, Mr. C.D. Johnson, made a very simple, but truly profound statement which goes directly to the heart of this issue. He said; "If you are worth your salt as a teacher, you will find ways to create situations by which each boy and girl in your class becomes the hero for a day in the eyes of their classmates."[5] This message is probably worth repeating to all involved with the education of young people. We must not forget that there is absolutely no substitute for a strong feeling of self-worth. We believe the way to accomplish this is to provide students with activities that provide opportunities for achievement and self-enhancement. Paul Eastwald noted that, "The truant typically has low self-esteem, feels powerless in school and subsequently may become resentful. Furthermore, he does not engender much respect from other better attending students."[6] A dropout who later became an inmate in the Huntsville State Prison in Texas summed up the dropout problem by stating, "I think this whole problem begins with teachers to students. I think it is very important for teachers to know their class as individuals, not just as a group."[7] Olsen and Moore, in Voices from the Classrooms, stated that students respond positively to teachers who are accessible and interested in them on a personal basis. The Fabens Independent School District, I'm proud to say, epitomizes this relationship between teachers and students.

EXPECTATIONS

In our district, measures have been taken to eliminate the idea held by some that minority students should not be expected to attend regularly, achieve excellence, or complete school as others do. A recent study by the Texas Center for Educational Research revealed that the average dropout rate for Whites exceeds that for Hispanics and Blacks in the six largest Texas districts; those with daily attendance over 50,000. The reseachers concluded that, "Educators and the public should not be led to believe that the

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[5] C. D. Johnson, Hillside Elementary School Faculty Meeting, El Paso, Texas, August, 1960.

[6] Paul Eastwald, "Attendance is Important: Combating Truancy in the Seconday School", NASSP Bulletin; April, 1989, v73 n 516, p. 28.

[7] Linda Wylie, "A Different Perspective on the Dropout Problem", NASSP Bulletin, Fall 1988, n 43, p. 15.

dropout problem is a non-White problem."[8] It is a serious problem for all ethnic groups. The research has repeatedly shown that socioeconomic status, rather than ethnicity, is the culprit which serves as the major educational barrier for minority groups. "Dropout rates for Whites and Blacks with similar family backgrounds are virtually the same. Dropout rates for Blacks and Whites living in central cities are comparable, as are rates for Blacks and Whites living in suburbs."[9]

As history reflects, economic barriers to education are not new to Americans and they must not now be allowed as an acceptable excuse for any individual or group to forego schooling. In 1867, a report of the Newburyport, Massachusetts, School Committee had the following to say about dropping out of school for economic reasons.

> "It is exceedingly to be regretted that parents will allow their sons to lose the great advantage of finishing the course of graduating from high school. When parents allow children to drop out of school for economic reasons, do they really make a gain? No doubt it is absolutely necessary for some students to leave before graduating, but parents should consider well, not merely the pecuniary motives, but the obligations they are under to furnish society with educated and well trained minds, true and good men."[10]

The Fabens ISD's Board of Trustees, school personnel and the community at large do not believe the myth that some students are naturally poor attenders and prone to drop out simply because they are poor or of minority heritage. The district's population is ninety-six percent Hispanic and is located in an area of extreme poverty, yet it has been able to maintain exemplary student attendance and dropout rates which have received statewide recognition. The Seventy-First Legislature of the State of Texas unanimously adopted House Resolution #843 on May 26, 1989, commending the Fabens ISD for establishing itself as a model school for dropout prevention.

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[8] Larry Toenjes, "The Dropout Problem Affects All Races", Texas Lone Star, October, 1989, p. 26.

[9] Education Research Bulletin, (U.S. Department of Education, Washington, D.C., Fall/Winter 1989-90), p. 3.

[10] Maris A. Vinouskis, "Have We Underestimated the Effect of Antebellum High School Attendance?", History of Education Quarterly, v 28 n4, Winter, 1988, p. 555.

In our school, we really believe we get what we expect from students and we expect all students enrolled to be in school every single day unless they have an acceptable excuse. When students are not present, we want to know why. When a student is absent unexcused, phones ring and homes are visited by district personnel. If for some reason the district attendance officer cannot make all the necessary home visits, the campus principals, and in some cases, even the superintendent assumes the responsibility. In any event, contact with the home is made as quickly as possible. Every parent in our district is attuned to the fact that we are extremely serious about school attendance.

I believe it is time for all schools to accentuate the positive accomplishments of its students and stop using the minority status of children as an excuse for institutional failure. It is my belief that true professionals will not stand idly by and allow students to become non-productive members of society because they are poor or of minority heritage. On the other hand, school personnel have the right to expect assistance and support from the home in order to get the job done. Of all adults, parents are in the most advantageous position to further the educational fortunes of their children. Schools must encourage all parents, and especially those of at-risk students, to become partners in the education of their children. Hanushek points out that "Research demonstrates that when schools reduce potential barriers to involvement by low-income families, parents will readily form a partnership in support of the educational success of their children".[11] Parental involvement is one of the factors which contribute to the many successes of the Fabens ISD.

On the subject of parental involvement and expectations, in June of 1987, the El Paso Times published an educational article entitled "The Extra-Ordinary Escobars". The article depicted the Escobar family who live in the Fabens school district. At the time the article was written, the family had five children in grades two through nine, none of whom had ever been absent from school. One single statement by Mrs. Escobar during her interview with the reporter revealed the secret to her success as reflected in her children's perfect attendance record. She said, "My kids sometimes wonder what it would be like to miss school, but it's not going to happen."[12] Today there are seven Escobar children in the Fabens schools from kindergarten through grade eleven, and none has ever missed a day of school. Although Mrs. Escobar is a parent who

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[11]E. A. Hanushek, "The Economics of Schooling: Production and Efficiency in Public Schools.", Journal of Economic Literature, 24: 1141-1177.

[12]Ramon Renteria, "The Extraordinary Escobars", El Paso Times, June 6, 1987, p. 1.

never had the opportunity for a formal education, all of us have a lot to learn from her concerning the power of expectations.

ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND ATTENDANCE

Our district believes that classroom teachers are the key to achieving high attendance, just as they are the key to success in all other aspects of educating students. The top priority of a school system should be to teach, and when students are absent effective teaching cannot take place. When teaching doesn't occur, neither does learning. As academic learning is reduced or eliminated, the possibility of dropping out becomes greater. Men in the Texas State Prison recently expressed their feelings on this matter as follows:

> "When I started working at a job, my attendance was poor. I fell behind the other students in my school work, so I dropped out."[13]
>
> "The only reason why I dropped out of school was because I got to where I was failing in some of my classes like science, reading and spelling."[14]
>
> "The reason I dropped out of school: If you were good in sports, you did not need to attend classes or do very much school work. Then my family moved us to another town and it did not make any difference if you were good in sports or not. By this time I was so far behind in my school work I did not think I could ever catch up with the other students in class. The teacher did not have time to help just one student at a time. The more I got behind in my school work, the more I did not want to go to school. Then I dropped out of school."[15]

People tend to frequent those places where they find success and to avoid places where they experience failure. High attendance enables a situation to develop in the life of a student from which success is very possible while continued absences contribute to the creation of a dropout. This is precisely why professionals must show concern every time a student is absent and why all students must be convinced that the concern shown is genuine. We must keep in mind that every dropout begins by first being absent. One absence could be critical in the life of a student. A Texas

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[13]Wylie, op. cit., p. 14.

[14]Ibid.

[15]Wylie, op. cit., p. 13.

dropout recently stated:

> "I might have stayed in school if I wouldn't have started running with the wrong people. I used to play in all kinds of sports and my grades were passing too, until one day I met a guy named Larry. One day we skipped class and went joy-riding in a hot car. We got caught and went to jail. I was in the twelfth grade when that happened. I didn't go back after that, but ever since then I have been in and out of jail."[16]

RESULTS OF HIGH ATTENDANCE

The Fabens dropout program is literally driven by our tremendous emphasis on attendance. One of the most recent official attendance reporting periods reflected the following figures:

O'Donnell Elementary School	- 98.783 %
Fabens Junior High School	- 98.495 %
Risinger Primary School	- 96.872 %
Fabens High School	- 96.795 %
Overall District ADA	- 97.724 %

The district's attendance rate has steadily increased during the past few years with average daily attendance (ADA) as reported to the Texas Education Agency normally well above ninety-seven percent. There have been numerous times when individual campuses have posted weekly attendance averages exceeding 99 percent, and occasionally 100 percent attendance by all students and teachers on a particular day is realized. When such events occur, media coverage is sought. As an example, on March 9, 1990, John Laird, editorial writer for the El Paso Times commended Risinger Primary School for achieving a 100 percent attendance day and O'Donnell Elementary School for reaching the 100 percent plateau on two successive days in the previous month. During the past few years, as attendance has moved upward, the dropout rate has continued to decline.

1984-85	1985-86	1986-87	1987-88	1988-89
12%	9%	3%	5%	4%

Needless to say, we believe there is a direct correlation between our school district's attendance and its dropout rate.

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[16] Wylie, op. cit., p. 14.

SUMMARY

In May of 1989, an official Texas Education Agency Accreditation Team's final report issued commendations to our district for developing strategies to improve student attendance and prevent dropouts. Furthermore, the team recognized the district for developing and implementing an at-risk plan although it had previously been exempted from doing so by virtue of maintaining an annual dropout rate below five percent.

The Fabens Board of Trustees, administration and staff are fully committed to dropout reduction through the achievement of exemplary student attendance. High attendance is a way of life in our district. We believe high attendance is the result of caring feelings exhibited by all school personnel and the spirit in which the educational opportunity is offered. In Fabens, we really do care about our kids and we also care about families who need help raising their children.

NUTS AND BOLTS

The district does not mandate the use of any specific attendance technique by the various campuses. We only require that attendance be given a very high priority by each campus principal and staff. We believe creative thinking on the part of all personnel is the only way a campus can ever hope to discover which particular attendance improvement techniques are most effective for use. Successful ideas utilized by one campus may or may not be appropriate for another. In fact, a technique which works for one may prove to be detrimental for another. With this in mind, the following list is presented merely as a sampling of the attendance related motivational ideas used by various campuses within the Fabens ISD during the past five years.

Board of Trustees:

- ADA figures announced during board meetings
- District attendance noted during board meetings
- Commendations publicly stated during board meetings to individual students, classrooms, families, teachers, principals, and campuses
- Perfect attenders introduced during board meetings
- Commendation letters to parents
- Campus updates during board meetings denoting positive efforts of students and staff
- Thank-you statements to the area media for coverage of positive school happenings
- Child care programs for school-age mothers
- Translation equipment available at board meetings for parents who cannot understand English

Central Administration:

State level presentations of Attendance +Plus
Congratulatory letters to parents from the superintendent
Memos/letters congratulating staff for attendance achievements
Media coverage highlighting outstanding attendance successes
Attendance articles in the News and Views school newsletter
Wildcat logo attendance flags presented by the superintendent to campuses with the highest attendance
Home visits by the superintendent and top assistants
Inclusion of past dropouts on the district-wide School Improvement Team chaired by the superintendent
Publication of the Fabens Fact Sheet which includes past attendance achievement data
Attendance as the first agenda item during the annual administrators' summer inservice training
Comparative studies of teacher attendance in relation to student attendance
Oral reminders to students by the superintendent noting accomplishments and expectations concerning attendance
Expectations of superintendent to principals concerning the importance of ongoing creative campus attendance programs
Daily review of campus and classroom attendance figures by the superintendent's staff
Reminders to staff of the financial implications in relation to attendance
Written reminders to parents and staff concerning the community attendance tradition
Community bus tours for staff to better understand and observe living conditions of the students
Immediate concern communicated to campus principals when attendance figures begin to decline regardless of the reason
Appointment of lead counselor as chairperson for district at-risk committee
Past dropouts appointed to district at-risk committee
Attendance expectations as a regular item during weekly administrative staff meetings
Funding of after school ACT/SAT prepatory classes

Campus level:

Awarding of attendance certificates to students
Awarding of attendance certificates to staff
Field trip rewards
Responsible person appointed to monitor grade level attendance
Movie theatre rental rewards
Parenting classes for school-age mothers and fathers
Parents of perfect attenders honored during school activities and athletic events

Season passes for all activities to students who attained prior year perfect attendance
Legislators and State Board of Education members utilized as attendance and dropout motivational speakers
Attendance competitions at all grade levels
Visual aids depicting weekly attendance competition
Posting of perfect attenders' names in hallways and lunchrooms
Perfect attending seniors recognized at graduation ceremonies
Campus wide verbal praise to individual classrooms for outstanding attendance
Citizenship awards at all grade levels
Immediate media notification of 100 percent attendance at a particular campus
Special open house activities scheduled for past dropouts
Annual home visits to all past dropouts by counselors and/or principals
Parent volunteer program to improve parent/school relations
Various parent training activities
Required teacher visits to the homes of at-risk students
Campus newsletters to parents include attendance data

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